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Stein, M and Morris, M (2009) Increasing the Number of Care Leavers in 'Settled, Safe Accommodation'. Research Report. Research Review, 3 . C4EO , London.

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Vulnerable/looked after children

Increasing the number of care leavers in 'settled, safe accommodation'

Key messages

- Being in 'settled, safe accommodation' is associated with increased wellbeing and engagement in education, employment or training.
- Young people leave care at an earlier age, on average, than other young people leave home. Those who leave care at a later age are more likely to have a successful transition to adulthood, including being in 'settled, safe accommodation'.
- Young people are likely to be in 'settled, safe accommodation' after leaving care when they (i) have good quality care which provides them with stability and pays attention to their education and wellbeing and (ii) are supported to leave care gradually, at an older age.
- Care leavers want and benefit from support services matched to their needs, including leaving care services, out-of-hours support, mentoring and positive family and kinship contact. Care leavers also need practical support with moving and setting-up in accommodation.
- Young people leaving from kinship care – including extended family and friends placements – see it as very positive, though there is limited evidence on this.
- Leaving care services work well in assisting most young people in accessing accommodation and supporting them in managing their accommodation.
- Services for disabled care leavers are not always co-ordinated and planned with mainstream leaving care services.
- More attention should be given to the accommodation and support needs of young parents, the community and family links of black and minority ethnic young people when they leave care, asylum seeking young people, and vulnerable young people returning from 'out of authority' placements.
- Effective service provision requires good communication between leaving care services, accommodation providers and carers, and should include the young person in decisions.
- It is important to identify groups who are at particular risk of poor housing outcomes early on: young people with social, emotional and behavioural problems; offenders, including those with a history of violence; those who run away from care; young disabled people who do not meet the threshold for adult services; and young asylum seekers with mental health problems.
- Housing and Children's Services need to identify problems with accommodation early on, have clear contingency arrangements, including sufficient emergency accommodation to prevent homelessness, and specialist accommodation for young people with higher support needs.
- The role, training and support needs of former foster parents and residential carers in providing ongoing personal and practical support to care leavers' needs to be reviewed further and formalised.

This review tells us what works in increasing the number of care leavers in 'settled, safe accommodation', on the basis of a systematic review of the research literature and analysis of key data. It aims to provide evidence that will help service providers to improve services, and ultimately outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The review was carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). The data analysis was conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

For young people, being in safe, settled accommodation is a top priority on leaving care and is about where they live, rent that is affordable, and being helped in budgeting and in managing their accommodation.

What is **safe, settled accommodation**?

- It is suitable for the young person in the light of his or her needs.
- The provider or landlord is approved by the responsible authority.
- It takes into account the young person's wishes, feelings and educational, training or employment needs.

Who are the key people with important knowledge and views working to improve services?

- care leavers
- carers (foster parents, care home staff)
- leaving care workers and social workers
- managers working at a strategic level delivering services that include housing and children's services
- birth family.

For care leavers being in 'safe settled accommodation' is the outcome of a process, involving a number of different stages: choosing when to leave care; being well prepared; having a choice of accommodation; being safe; being supported by leaving care services, family, friends and mentors; having an income or receiving financial assistance; and being involved in all these different stages. Leaving care to live in settled, safe accommodation is connected with continuing in education or employment, wellbeing and achieving the *Every child matters* outcomes.

Carers are responsible for young looked after people until they leave care. These may be foster parents, residential carers or kinship carers, including extended family members and friends. The evidence suggests that young people who develop a good relationship with their carer are more likely to be in

stable and better housing after leaving care. Carers need to be well supported and their role formalised in providing this support to young people after they have left their care.

Leaving care workers and social workers are responsible for assisting young people in moving on from care to their own accommodation. This will involve them in assessing the needs of the young person and agreeing a pathway plan with them. In carrying out these responsibilities, they should pay particular attention to the different stages of 'being in settled, safe accommodation' identified above – problems arising in any of these stages may alert them to difficulties young people may have in accessing and managing their accommodation. Strong commitment and positive relationships with young people are associated with good outcomes for care leavers.

“ An integrated approach is essential in preparing young people for adulthood – not just at the time of leaving care. ”



Managers working at a strategic level deliver services that include: leaving care services, access to supported accommodation and independent accommodation, homeless strategies, bridging the gap between children's and adult services. **Local authorities**, acting as corporate parents, have a strategic role to play in managing care leavers access to 'settled, safe accommodation'. This will require a framework of services and funding streams, underpinned by formal relationships between children's services, housing agencies and other services to ensure high level commitment, effective communication, partnership working and joint planning across the local authority. This should include joint protocols and agreements, and detailed specifications for service commissioning.

An integrated approach with **children's services, housing services and adult services** is essential in preparing young people for adulthood – not just at the time of leaving care: this should be the main purposes of multi-agency working. The success of leaving care is strongly associated with good relationships between the leaving care team and the young person and also with good communication between the leaving care team and housing providers. The variability of the range and quality of services needs to be addressed.

Birth family contact is sometimes re-established by the young person when they leave care. This can be a positive source of both practical and emotional support for the young person. But for some young people, past difficulties can mean that re-establishing contact makes it harder for the young person to settle down and some young people may regress educationally or suffer harm as a result.

Is there specific data available to inform the way forward?

DCSF data is available on the accommodation types of young care leavers who had been looked after continuously for at least 12 months and who were still in care aged 16 in April of their final year of compulsory education. The most recent dataset, however, does not distinguish between accommodation deemed suitable and that deemed unsuitable.

The evidence base

The review draws on 98 studies. There are some limitations to the evidence base, mainly due to the lack of controlled studies. In particular, we need:

- more information on young people's views of the accessibility and acceptability of the services and interventions offered
- information on services for young people who have left care and subsequently experience housing difficulties
- a review of the skills and behaviours of foster parents, residential workers, other carers and birth family members that best help young people find and sustain a home
- research that makes the link between housing and social care and the agencies that must work together to help a young person find 'settled, safe accommodation'.

Review methods

Research literature was identified through systematic searches of relevant databases and websites, recommendations from our Thematic Advisory Group, and reference harvesting. The review team used a 'best evidence' approach to systematically select literature of the greatest relevance and quality to include in the review. This approach attempts to eliminate bias in the selection of literature, to ensure that the research findings are objective. Research on looked after children or care leavers, aged 13 to 25, published since 2000 and relating to studies in the UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand was included.

Next steps

An updated version of this review is due to be published in Autumn 2010. This will include good practice examples and views from children, young people, parents, carers and service providers.

C4EO reviews on improving the educational outcomes of looked after children and improving the emotional and behavioural health of looked after children are also available on the C4EO website. Local decision-makers and commissioners working in local authorities and Children's Trusts may also find it helpful to read the Vulnerable children directors' summary, which presents the key messages from all three reviews www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/vulnerablechildren

C4EO is using the main messages from the three Vulnerable children reviews to underpin its knowledge sharing and capacity building work with Children's Trusts, and through them the full range of professions and agencies working with looked after children and young people.

Research summaries

This summary is a concise and accessible overview of the key messages from the research review on this topic.

Please go to www.c4eo.org.uk to download full and in-depth versions.

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